**Shackleton Crossing - ASG 65 - 2016**

Report by : Tarn Pilkington

Date : 18/3/15

Voyage Dates : 1/2/16 to 19/2/16

Ship: Polar Pioneer

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**INTRODUCTION**

Aurora Expeditions has been guiding guests on the Antarctic Peninsula and the Shackleton Traverse of South Georgia for over ten years. The principle aim of The Shackleton Traverse is to  provide a unique perspective of Shackleton’s route whilst maintaining a high level of safety for all involved.

The current Aurora success rate for completing the entire crossing is around sixty five percent.

**Team**

Leader : Tarn Pilkington

Assistant Guide : Phil Penny  and Jane Morris.

All the guiding team are IFMGA guides from New Zealand.

**Participants**

Jerry Purvis (Scotland), Jim Morrow (NZ), Paul Franklin (UK), Rob Arathoon (UK), Kevin Bannister (UK), Judy Bannister Pike (UK), Steven Langton (UK), Jillian MCewan (UK), Eberhard Schoebitz (Germany), Rafael Schoebitz (Germany). Phillipa Norman (UK).

**Daily Summary**

**Day 1 onwards** -   9/3/16 - Antarctic Peninsula and The Weddell Sea

Meet aboard Polar Pioneer. First day at sea with equipment checks on board with purchases of extra consumables in Ushuaia. Mandatory emergency drills and briefings completed.

Heavy seas meant a landing in the South Shetlands was unlikely so the expedition team decided to head directly for the Trinity Island area.

**Day 4** - Saturday -12/3/16

Curtis Bay and Trinity Island

First landing at Curtis Bay in beautiful weather. Ascent of Phils Knob in outer Curtis Bay. In the afternoon the ship entered Mikkelson Harbour for a landing at Bombay Island. The climbing party made an ascent of Borge Peak in very warm temperatures and excellent snow conditions.

**Day 5** - Sunday – 13/3/16

James Ross Island

Landing at “The Naze” on northern James Ross Island. The small rocky outcrops on either end of the peninsula provided good “leg stretching” objectives for the morning.

**Day 6** - Monday – 14/3/16

Devil Island and Brown Bluff

Landing at Devils Island and another chance for a quick dash up both of the high points on the Island. Both summits provide good views of Vega Island and further climbing opportunities.

In the afternoon the team went ashore at Brown Bluff on the Tabarin Peninsula for instruction  in glacier travel and general climbing technique.

**Day 7** - Tuesday – 15/3/16

Elephant Island

The moderate swell at Cape Wild did not allow a landing but the weather was good enough for a one hour zodiac cruise.

**Day 8/9** – Wednesday and Thursday – 16/17- /3/16

At Sea

In the Scotia Sea.

**Day 10** - Friday – 18/3/16

South Georgia and King Haakon.

Arrive early at King Haakon to moderate rain and gusty north westerly. Ascended to Shackleton Gap in very strong winds and heavy rain at times. A visit to Peggoty Bluff later in the morning as the rain continued.

Based on current conditions and the weather forecast for the following days the crossing plan was amended. The crossing would recommence from either Possession, Antarctic or Fortuna Bays.

**Day 11** - Saturday – 19/3/16

Ocean Harbour and Grytviken.

On arrival at Ocean Harbour the climbers ascended the prominent rocky ridge to the south to find a 1.5 metre cairn on the summit. The ridge scramble led to an easy descent down to the  ship wreck in the harbour making for a fantastic 3 hour loop.

**Day 12** - Sunday – 20/3/16

Gold Harbour, Cooper Bay and Drygalski Fjord.

Great landings at Gold Harbour and Cooper Bay were followed by a ship cruise up to the Risting Glacier.

**Day 13** - Monday – 21/3/16

Fortuna Glacier and The Nunatak

Leaving the ship at 6AM the climbers made it up the Fortuna Glacier to ascend the Nunatak. Spectacular views were had from the summit ridge in all directions including the Crean Glacier and the Tridents. An alternative descent route was tried on the true right of the Fortuna Glacier where more crevasses were encountered but a relatively easy route was threaded through the mid ice fall.

**Day 14** - Tuesday – 22/3/16

Low cloud with strong winds and rain greeted us early on Tuesday morning. Navigating in cloud over the pass and a quick descent saw un reach Stromness in under 2 hours. Extreme gusts saw one party member blown of his feet to luckily land uninjured.

**Day 15/16/17**- Wednesday – 23/24/25 - /3/16

At sea bound for the Falkland Islands and then eventually Ushuaia.

**ROUTE INFORMATION**

Approximate total distance covered – 19kms of the actual 40KM traverse.

King Haakon to Shackleton Gap 4.5km

Fortuna Bay to Nunatak 8.75kM

Fortuna Bay to Stromness 5.87kM

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**SAFETY MANAGEMENT**

**Client experience screening**

 The participants were further screened and trained in the Antarctic Peninsula and Weddell Sea areas to ensure fitness and skill levels were sufficient. Supplementary training involving glacier travel, self arrest, personal gear management, ice axe and crampon use and tent erection were completed (refer to the Daily Summary).

Vetting client applications was undertaken as per previous years. Some of the clients were asked to complete additional courses before being accepted. Four of the clients demonstrated a good level of skill whilst the other seven showed a definite lack of familiarity with basic skills, equipment and movement.

One client withdrew on his own accord two days before arriving. I would have pulled this client off anyway due to an overall lack of skill.

Committing to ten clients or more per trip this year meant that client ability was an important factor in the decision to go or not. As there were a number of clients with fairly average skills then there is a higher possibility of issues arising in poor weather or injury etc.

**Expedition Planning and options**

I have been involved with this trip since 2010. 2010,2011,2012 and 2015 were completed in full. 2013 and 2016 were undertaken but were changed due to weather. 2014 was not started due to weather in king Haakon. Five from eight makes 62.5% is close to what we advertise as a  success rate.

The decision not to attempt the crossing this year was based on the weather forecast. The guiding team, and Christian all agreed it was the right decision. Factors affecting the decision were that the weather was highly changeable with an unsettled westerly pattern. The group was 10 persons some of whom were not great on their feet.The position of the ship was also a consideration as Chrisitian wanted to primarily be in the south east corner..

I would not change my decision in retrospect. The weather was unsettled with fronts crossing every night accompanied with strong winds and precipitation. All the clients were told that the expedition is run conservatively within certain parameters that are all based on safety. There is also a bigger picture to consider with where the ship is positioned and what it can achieve for the other passengers and kayakers.

The options on this expedition for starting are somewhat limited to a small window when arriving in KH:

1.Its either on or not, so the ship could hang around overnight or start in the south at Cooper/Drygalski and then come north. Landings on the western side are limited so if the swell/sea state is an issue then options are almost non-exsistent closer to KH.

2. If KH was out the other option is to head around into Possession Bay for a start a day later. But sea state is a consideration and options for landings for the general passengers is part of the mix.

3. It could be possible I think to start from Antarctic bay on the east side of the Crean up a glacier to the Nunatak and then continue to Fortuna.

4. This year we ended up doing a trip up to the Nunatak from Fortuna on the best day followed by the pass to Stromness the following day in appalling weather. From KH we got to Shackleton Gap in appalling weather and retreated to the ship as a day trip.

The clients were told about success rates and how the expedition may change due to weather at the first briefing. They were continuously updated most nights during the voyage.

In the end I believe we delivered an excellent experience to the clients who experience a variety of locations and climbed a number of  interesting objectives.

**Client equipment**

 A gear list was sent to clients well in advance of the departure. Individual client information requests regarding gear was answered as soon as possible.The equipment clients brought along was mostly satisfactory. However, a pair of non-shanked /non-water proofed trekking/climbing boots was brought by one of the clients. He also had no gaiters. He was able to demonstrate good cramponing skills but my main concern was the certainty that the boots would get saturated quickly and freeze when the temperatures fell.

**Expedition Equipment**

All the SG crossing camping equipment is inventoried and it is well marked and seperated from the other camping gear in the front hold. This equipment should only be used for the crossing.

*Tents* -  The three Mountain Hardwear Trango  tents were checked with one having a repaired pole. This seems to be fine.

The Hilleberg tent was erected on the flying bridge. This is a large tunnel style tent which could sleep four people. These tents have an excellent reputation but it is large and I would like to see how it performs in strong winds.

Tent repair kits were made up containing extra sleeves, joiners and duct tape.

*Cooking/Food –* There are now sufficient gas cannisters and dehydrated meals on board for next year ( Refer to the Camping Inventories).

**Communications**

The Inreach satellite device was trialled whilst out in the field and worked well using bluetooth with my Iphone 5S. Messages were sent to the Expedition Leader whilst out in the field during two of the days we were in the field on SG.

**Navigation**

My Garmin 64s uses the Garmin’s “Birdseye view “ imagery of South Georgia. Although the image is not high resolution, it has sufficient to accurately display images and navigate with.

In addition to this I downloaded maps from the Inreach website for SG to my Iphone 5s. This map is not highly detailed but the positioning displayed on the screen were accurate and positions matched the GPS.

Two other GPS systems were carried which interfaced with the 1: 100,000 BAS Map. Compass declination adjustment is seven degrees west.

A synthetic canvas map with a Google Earth image at a scale of approximately 1:25,000 was used again. It is easily rolled up and stowed in a jacket and is completely weather proof. The same map was posted on the Polar Pioneer office whiteboard with GPS coordinates for all waypoints.

**Contingency**

There is accurate information on the exit to Possession Bay but we still have insufficient information regarding the exit to Antarctic Bay. This year we were able to look from the Nunatak down into Antarctic Bay. Although not sighted all the way through it would seem like an exit into Antarctic bay is likely (refer AB Escape 1 and 2).

**Weather information**

Weather information was being sent daily from Tomas Holik in Buenos Aries and from a guide in New Zealand. This was supplemented by the Grib files already available on the ship via Chrisitian. These seemed to be very accurate making decisions with more confidence easier. The [Metvuw.com](http://metvuw.com/) forecasting website provided us with reasonably accurate timings on the passage of fronts and forecasted precipitation totals. Information from Kevin in New Zealand was described as “grim”.

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